

Exploring Gulf restoration issues with individuals working on the ground and in the water



Telley Madina, Oxfam America

Telley Madina is a Coastal Communities Program Officer with Oxfam America, and the former Executive Director of the Louisiana Oystermen Association. For over a year, he traveled across the country with his father-in-law, Louisiana Oystermen Association President Byron Encalade, advocating on behalf of Louisiana oyster fishermen.

AN OYSTER INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE

ELI: What effect has the spill had on oyster fishermen?

Telley: The oil spill has affected oyster fishermen in many ways. To start, they took a bitter financial hit because of the spill. The spill happened at a time when fishermen were going into a season. This is usually the time when they invest money into their boats, anticipating that, within the first two weeks of being on the water, they can make the money back. So, a good portion of the fishermen had just invested funds, and obviously they didn't get any return on it. And, now, since things have stretched out for so long, these guys are in a financial position where it's damn near past desperation.

Another effect of the spill is that there may have been a permanent tarnishing of the way individuals view a Louisiana oyster. I think some may be second-guessing whether the oysters are safe to feed to their children and to their families. This has caused issues with pricing as well.

When asked whether oysters are safe to eat, the answer I give is that my father-in-law, Byron Encalade, has been in the seafood industry some 40 years. My wife, who is his second-oldest child, has been eating seafood off of his boat since she was born. And she is still eating oysters. If a man working on a boat knows exactly where he is getting his oysters and is willing to feed them to his family, then obviously it must be safe because no one is going to put their child in harm's way just for a dollar. And they are definitely not going to put their reputation on the line. I think it is important to remember that, in the seafood industry, we can't afford for even one person to get sick.

Added to all of this, many of the oyster fishermen are still recovering from Hurricane Katrina. Byron lost five boats to Katrina. He managed to rebuild the business and get back to two boats before the spill. Now, his boats are out of work and he had to sell his trucking company because he didn't have the amount of seafood to put on the trucks to justify the costs of insurance. That's a pretty tough situation.

ELI: After the spill occurred, what were the oystermen seeing on the water?

Telley: Oil. Dead fish and other ocean inhabitants. And more oil. Aside from that, there were things you just stopped hearing after the oil spill. Plaquemines Parish President Billy Nungesser mentioned this first, but at night time in the country around 7 or 8 pm, you would usually hear mosquitoes and other little noises outside and on the Bayou. For a long time, you just didn't hear anything. It was really weird and pretty scary because we were used to hearing those noises.

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ELI: How has that changed over the past year? What are conditions like now?

Telley: There's less oil, but it still pops up in plumes in different places. And obviously the conditions are different depending on your location. The oyster beds near ground zero for the oil spill, on the west bank of the Mississippi River, were heavily damaged by the spill. On the east bank, most of the oysters were damaged by the freshwater that was released to stop the oil from spreading.

ELI: How would oystermen like to see the Gulf restored?

Telley: I think people want it to be restored to what it was before the oil spill. From my perspective, I think that, since we have money coming to Louisiana, we have a chance to fix the coast. And, if we fix the coast, that will lead to the long-term sustainability of the seafood industry – a \$2.4 billion industry for the State of Louisiana. We need to spend the next 10 to 20 years working on common-sense projects that will restore the Gulf, and restore Louisiana in the areas in which we're losing land.

If coastal restoration doesn't happen, all of these conversations are for naught. We aren't going to be able to live here in the long term. My son is three-years old and, in 15 years, my wife and I will have to make a tough decision because he will be going away to college. If we have not done anything in the way of coastal restoration within this town, within Louisiana, within the Gulf Coast by that time, I will advise my son not go to college in New Orleans. That is a very serious statement – to not continue to lay roots here, to make the conscious decision to move somewhere else. But we need to consider the long-term sustainability of the Madina family because we are acting as if a football field of land is not disappearing every 30 minutes.

In the city of New Orleans, in which I live, which I love, we have issues with crime, we have issues with education. All of those issues are very important. But coastal restoration is just as important, because it is about sustainability. The sustainability and the livelihood of being able to drive 20 miles and have a chance to go fishing, that's up for grabs. And we need to do something to address it.